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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBLIN 000868

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Local and European Elections in Ireland:  
Ahern Government to Take Hits, But Not At  
Expense of TransAtlantic Relationship

REFERENCE: Dublin 811

1. (SBU) Summary: Local and European Parliament elections on June 11 will be a referendum on Irish PM Ahern's Fianna Fail-led coalition government, as voters have their first say since returning the government to office in 2002. Ahern's FF party is expected to take sizeable hits for failure to deliver on the domestic agenda; foreign policy issues, including Iraq, do not feature prominently in the debate. The political opposition looks set to make healthy gains, particularly the left-leaning Labour and Sinn Fein parties. After EU enlargement, Irish MEP seats were reduced from 15 to 13; with local issues dominant, we do not anticipate any hardening of views on the TransAtlantic relationship. End Summary.

Local Elections A Referendum on Ahern Government  
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2. (SBU) Local and European elections were last held in Ireland in 1999, with PM Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fail taking 383 of the 883 county and city council seats nationwide. Current polling indicates the party is down eight percent in support from 1999, and we expect Fianna Fail to lose anywhere from 50 to 100 seats come June 11. The public, while not openly hostile to the government, is still critical of the government's failure to deliver on its 2002 general election manifesto, with spending cuts in education and health care the most sensitive issues. Anything over a 50 seat loss will spell trouble for Ahern, whose personal popularity rating is in the low 40s. A meltdown in the local elections may re-ignite rumors about Ahern's departure for the EU Commission (reftel). Though unlikely to signal his imminent departure, a poor return may prompt Ahern to be more radical in a Cabinet shuffle expected during the summer recess.

Growth of the Left  
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3. (SBU) Despite the downturn in government support, moderate opposition party Fine Gael is failing to capitalize on voter unhappiness. Fine Gael, decimated in the 2002 general election, is struggling to convince the electorate it is still relevant, and to hold on to its 278 local seats. A loss of more than fifty seats would spell doom for party leader Enda Kenny, and leave many questioning Fine Gael's future.

4. (SBU) The largest beneficiaries are likely to be the Labour Party, which has raised its profile with strong anti-war views, and Sinn Fein, which is focusing on marginalized inner-city communities. Polls indicate that Labour's bounce will be smaller than Sinn Fein's, with the latter expected to double its current low baseline of 21 local seats. The Green Party and Independent candidates may attract a small protest vote, but are unlikely to figure in the overall scheme of things.

European Parliament Candidates  
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5. (SBU) Under the Nice Treaty, which paved the way for EU enlargement, Ireland's representation in the European Parliament was cut from 15 to 13 seats. With eight of the current MEPs retiring, the competition for seats is fierce and wide open. Fianna Fail will struggle to hold on to its six seats, while Fine Gael and Labour may add to their seats (four and one, respectively). Fine Gael's likely success in the EP elections, in contrast to the local elections, is based on a smart selection of candidates, with a slate that balances youth with experience. Sinn Fein hopes to win its first MEP seat, but polls suggest this will be a struggle. The Greens may lose both their MEP slots.

16. (SBU) Likely MEP winners include Dublin Lord Mayor (and Bertie Ahern protégé) Royston Brady; Fine Gael Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Gay Mitchell; and current Labour MEP Proinsias De Rossa. De Rossa is a staunch critic of U.S. foreign policy, as would be the other strong Labour candidate Peter Cassells (a trade union leader). Mitchell is an Atlanticist who has long argued for Ireland to rethink its position on military neutrality, and the other Fine Gael MEP contenders fall in behind this line. Brady is inexperienced in foreign policy, but may be receptive to Ahern's counsel. Sinn Féin announced a strong anti-war and pro-neutrality platform in launching its campaign. The other MEP candidates are largely focused on domestic issues, particularly the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy reforms on Irish farmers. Iraq and U.S.-EU ties do not feature prominently on the door steps, though this has not stopped the Labour Party, Sinn Féin, and, to a lesser extent, the Greens, from attempting to make it an election issue.

KENNY